

Sandra Trabucco Valenzuela, Luciane Ferreira Bonaldo

Storytelling in Advertising: The Case of *Os Últimos Desejos da Kombi*

Abstract: The aim of this study is to analyse an advertising video produced in 2014 and entitled *Os Últimos Desejos da Kombi* [Kombi: Last Wishes], a creation of AlmapBBDO for Volkswagen do Brazil, which closed its vehicle assembly line in January 2014 (video available at <https://vimeo.com/90870501>). The film presents a contemporary trend in advertising creation: storytelling, which means narratives based on real experiences, allied to a communicative strategy and fiction-writing techniques, and results in stories that are both involving and memorable. This tendency seeks to create affective ties with consumers so that the stories are remembered and narrated positively several times, thus being propagated by the recipient that was impacted by them.

Keywords: advertising copywriting, advertising creation, *Os Últimos Desejos da Kombi*, storytelling, transmedia

1 Storytelling as an advertising tool

Storytelling is one of the fundamental components in the formation of a culture because it makes it possible to find plausible explanations for reality. The stories told in the media gain the dimension of unquestionable truths to be read, interpreted, assimilated, and incorporated into daily life and the imaginary. As a privileged tool, media communication adopts the oral narrative as a strategy for dialogue with the recipient/consumer, recovering the practice of that same oral tradition and coupling it with non-verbal representations of imagistic and sonorous components, resulting in pieces that aim to construct a differentiated, memorable, and exciting communication. In this dialogical relationship between the narrator and the recipient/consumer, advertising creation identifies, by means of the fictional report, an opportunity to create films capable of bringing the two instances of narrator and recipient closer by diving into the world of imagination, of dreams, of desires, establishing at any given moment the chance, even if temporary, to satisfy this imaginary powered by narrative where the receiver feels he is the protagonist of the story. In contemporary times, technological breakthroughs as well as access to new technology have given rise to differentiated consumers connected to social networks and all manner of sites that allow an incessant activity of exploring, finding, acquiring, and sharing experiences. The

consumer becomes the protagonist of many stories, publishing and commenting on his own narratives.

In order to draw attention, arouse interest, generate a wish, and lead to purchase, advertising appropriates the art of narrative to communicate with consumers in an exciting and, at the same time, informative way by means of its audio-visual productions. The adoption of the art of narrating to persuade, inform, or remind the consumer about a particular product or brand has become a common practice in advertising. Approaching consumers by inserting them into a narrative context is one of the gimmicks used by the creative teams in advertising agencies to create, maintain, and strengthen links with their audiences so that they identify and recognize themselves as part of a particular group for which a certain product or service – the one being advertised – is designed, be it in the traditional or segmented mass media.

The act of telling and listening to stories has been present since primitive societies, having the goal of understanding the real world based on a mythical perspective:

Moreover, in this infinite variety of forms, it is present at all times, in all places, in all societies; indeed narrative starts with the very history of mankind; there is not, there has never been anywhere, any people without narrative; all classes, all human groups, have their stories, and very often those stories are enjoyed by men of different and even opposite cultural backgrounds [...]. Like life itself, it is there, international, transhistorical, transcultural. (Barthes 1975, 237)

In the situation described here, by borrowing the art of storytelling, narrative production in advertising proposes audio-visuals that narrow the distance between narrator and consumer, allowing a dive into the world of imagination, of dreams, of desires, and of satisfaction. As an integral part of the narrative, the consumer identifies himself as viewer and actor, sometimes the main one, sometimes the supporting one.

The proliferation of brands, products, and services that impact consumers daily requires a communication to be remembered in a striking, positive, and informative way. It is in this context that storytelling techniques are adopted and reshaped to win consumers over.

“Storytelling,” in advertising practice, is a term that defines the act of telling a story, is a logic of structuring thinking and diffusing narrative based on life experiences of one’s own that creates impact on the target audience, which accepts the story as engaging and memorable. When the term “storytelling” is adopted and applied to organizational communication and advertising, it can be understood as the art of telling real or fictional stories, either of individuals or companies, with an emotional and engaging tone able to arouse the attention of the recip-

ient by means of mnemonic stimuli, synaesthesia, and imagination, providing experienced pleasures – or just desired ones. The appropriation of storytelling in advertising means making use of memory with the goal of creating affective ties with consumers so that the stories can be remembered and narrated several times in a positive way. In turn, storytelling is a resource that is applied by means of several media in a transmedia process, that is, media convergence as a cultural practice. According to Henry Jenkins (2011): “Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story” (Jenkins 2011).

In advertising practice, storytelling is characterized by a confessional tone, first-person narrative, the use of archetypes as characters, colloquial expressions, and universal themes, whose emotional value maintains suspense and stimulates the audience’s curiosity and emotional stamina. All these aspects are present in the video *Os Últimos Desejos da Kombi*.

2 Analysis of the video *Os Últimos Desejos da Kombi*

The analysis of the audio-visual production *Os Últimos Desejos da Kombi* [Kombi: Last Wishes] from 2014 (four minutes and ten seconds), created by the AlmapBBDO advertising agency for Volkswagen Brazil, and produced by Spray Filmes, is an example of the use of transmedia storytelling in advertising, representing a diversity that includes, in addition to audio-visual material, printed pieces, relationships with consumers, actions in social networks, and marketing activities that encompass the whole world, among other things – all to bring the production of a product to an end. The audio-visual piece which is the subject of this article is a narrative that aims to move, sensitize, and make viewers travel through time, while however informing them of a product discontinuation.

Reusing the oral narrator, the piece points to a traditional narrator who tells its experiences and shares them with its recipients: “Experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn. And among those who have written down the tales, it is the great ones whose written version differs least from the speech of the many nameless storytellers” (Benjamin 2006, 83). Narrated in the first person, following the device of prosopopoeia, it is the vehicle that tells, in a testimonial format, its own story, as if it were an old lady (played by the actress Maria Alice Vergueiro) that evokes Jung’s “Wise

Old Man” archetype, entering into a dialogue with the receiver and constituting Benjamin’s “Merchant Sailor” metaphor, which is presented in his text “The Storyteller” (Benjamin 2006, 83–109): the person who, as a result of his work, travels through several places and meets narratives from distant localities. This omniscient narrative instance shows its worldview, its experiences, in a diegesis in multiple spatio-temporal situations.

At first, the narrative shows an image of a clear sky with bright clouds and the voice of the “old lady” Kombi saying that she is “surprisingly well.”¹ The image presents the idea of death from a religious perspective where the sky is a post-mortem peaceful space. Following that, the camera descends to earth, in a low-angle shot, in a fast-moving shot, showing the double line that separates the two lanes of a highway. It is the Kombi that “hits the road” and begins to tell its stories, all of them in a metaphor for the long road of life.

At 15 seconds, we have a general plan of the road to be covered by a Kombi as blue as the sky, with the license plate “VWB 2013” (Volkswagen Brazil). Its horn marks the appearance of the title: “Kombi: Last Wishes.”

Then, at 25 seconds, the image acquires aspects of an old documentary in black and white, in the 1940s style, set in Germany. The idea is to show the designer of the Kombi, the Dutchman Ben Pon, and his son, Ben Pon, Jr, a boy of about eight years old. The scene recalls images of *Citizen Kane* (1941) by Orson Wells, specifically the scene where the young Kane plays in the snow. These images depict the idea of reality and, at the same time, of a dramatic construction extracted from a classic film, bringing both the video and the Kombi closer to the concept of a work of art.

The narrative instance also introduces ironies: assuming the Kombi’s personality, the old lady comments on her own curves (“nice curves”) and talks to the recipient straightforwardly, in a speech both friendly and playful, saying that “if you are a human being and live on this planet, we have definitely met somewhere,” that is, that all recipients have already seen her. Then, in a hoarse voice, she adds a new irony: “I don’t care what they may say, I have been around.”

In these latter words, the narrator assumes a sarcastic and mocking tone, in an ambiguity that captures the idea that she has experienced a lot in life and been through many situations – many drivers – while the image shows three Kombis driving on an oval circuit. Such irony and sarcasm are a sign of the conflict: the narrative instance has aged and this will have consequences. The recipient expects to know how the Kombi character deals with this situation, what her life was like, and what the future will be without her.

¹ All translations from *Os Últimos Desejos da Kombi* are our own. An English version of the production is available at <https://bit.ly/18fBDY1> (12 March 2019).

It is worth remembering that car adverts generally feature young people and not the elderly, since they depend on the notion of speed, dynamism, and innovation. The voice of an aging lady proposes the opposite of what is usually employed for this line of products.

In the video, the narrator comes across to the consumer as a friend, establishing a close relationship not only with the recipient who is listening at that particular moment, but also with all of those who profited from the benefits of the Kombi in some way all over the world.

At 58 seconds, the image goes back to Brazil, introducing the couple of Frank and Isis Kochig, who travelled around the world in a Kombi, passing through twenty-five countries. In the image, the scenes show a Kombi cruising through forests, deserts, streams, and isolated places, on an adventure in which the partnership between the couple and the Kombi is established as something that surpasses the mere use of a vehicle: it is a dynamic relationship which allows access to leisure, fun, and knowledge of new cultures. The Kombi represents here an intermediary, the object of desire that becomes a partner in adventure.

Soon after comes the story of Mr Nenê: as the narration asserts, “she” was taken by Mr Nenê to three World Cups. The personification of the Kombi is evident by the time the car is brought to the World Cup playing the role of the adventurer’s companion. Decorated with the Brazilian flag, the Kombi was transported by land, sea, and air to get to the World Cups in Mexico, the US, and Japan. As in the previous episode, the Kombi is responsible for providing opportunities to make dreams come true.

The following story told by the “old lady” is Miriam Maya’s, who was born inside a Kombi; for this reason, the Kombi-narrator feels responsible for the girl as if she were her daughter. According to Marcelo Nogueira, this was one of the most remarkable stories reported by Kombi consumers: “There’s a girl whose pregnant mother was about to have a baby and there was no time. She got in a neighbour’s Kombi that would take her to the hospital. She was born inside the Kombi. Because of that, she has a love relationship with the Kombi. She tattooed a Kombi onto her leg. She loves the Kombi even today. It’s a nice story” (Nogueira 2013; our translation).

In addition, the North American artist Bob Hieronimus decorated his Kombi and took it to the Woodstock Festival in 1969, making the car a symbol that marked the hippie generation.

Not just the couple but also Nenê, Miriam, and Bob are shown by the camera as an intruder that breaks into the intimacy of the characters, searching for objects and images that represent their bond with the Kombi. The recipient shares this intrusion of the lens, sees the Kombi tattooed on Miriam’s leg, finds pictures of Bob at Woodstock beside the Kombi, and meets Frank and Iris’s daughter, and

witnesses their reaction when they receive the Kombi's odometer as a gift at home.

To create suspense, the narration is interrupted and there is a brief silence; in the image, an ad on a magazine page claims, with a bang: "There goes the Kombi. Soon, in no dealership near you." This is what Marcelo Nogueira, editor of the text in the video, called "de-launching," as he explains:

We create a text that would be the launching of a car, but it is just the opposite. The end: "Here comes, or rather, there goes the Kombi. The world automotive industry least expected de-launching. And like all the Kombis, it will be released with no trip computer, no air bag, no ABS brakes, no touch screen panel, but with retro style and charm from the factory." (Nogueira 2013; our translation)

The audio-visual narrative rhythm is supported by contemporary and old images in quick succession; the variation of scenes (characters, locations, and times) is easily observed by the recipient. This feature catches attention and arouses interest, causing anticipation.

Subsequently, in a detailed plan, a magazine falls on the table and a bass sound is heard, alerting us to the thrill of an unexpected announcement. Soon, TV newsreel scenes from around the world pop up and announce the closing of the Kombi assembly line in Brazil. The images throng onto the screen, in multiple idioms, and the narrative instance shows surprise about the world reaction: "It was a commotion. Not even I knew that so many people cared about me." That text is spoken exactly in the middle of the video, at 2 minutes and 5 seconds. It generates credibility and, at the same time, surprises the recipient, who observes himself included in the group that feels touched by the discontinuation of the Kombi.

The "old lady" then presents to the recipient her will, posted in the form of an ad on a newspaper page. In a noble gesture, the Kombi proves to be generous. In the will, people are honoured by the vehicle due to the love they expressed for her. Nenê got the hub autographed by Pelé; Miriam got the first draft for the Kombi designed by Pon, which is presented at the beginning of the video; Frank and Iris got the odometer with the most mileage possible; Bob got an art kit in the shape of a Kombi; Rolando Bassini, who turned the Kombi into an Italian trattoria, was presented with ravioli moulds in the shape of a Kombi. The video depicts many admirers of the Kombi being presented with items, including the delivery of gifts to fans from other countries. Such a feature shows that the affection for the vehicle is universal, just like the experiences provided by it.

However, as the video deals with Kombi's last wishes, the last of them still remains: seeing again the Kombi designer's son in the Netherlands, who, according to the narrative instance, is technically Kombi's brother. In that image, present

and past are united, the child and the already ageing son of the designer, who smiles at the sight of the Kombi in front of his house.

The video is concluded with the Kombi's last words, in a confessional tone: "How do I feel? Surprisingly well." Those are the same words spoken at the beginning of the video, giving it a cyclical dimension, that is, a circular time, connoting the Kombi's perennial presence, its immortality. In the image, the Kombi follows the road, fading through the right-hand third of the image, where the sky occupies most of the screen, with the predominance of the sunset light metaphorizing farewell and death. Then comes the end of the background music track, and the image fades out to a black screen.

The "old lady" develops her speech as an omniscient narrator, able to comment on each experienced moment as if she were ubiquitous, for she talks as if she were in another dimension, beyond death.

The first-person narrative is interrupted in some moments of the video, as when it shows Bob talking about the art on his Kombi and when it displays parts of the news commenting on the end of an era: the Kombi era.



Fig. 1: Advertising for *Os Últimos Desejos da Kombi* (Matsubara 2013). Promotional image.

In a globalized world which is also saturated with products, information, and brands, it is a challenge to catch the recipient's/consumer's attention, to create messages that stand out for relevance, effectiveness, and utility and become memorable, establishing ties and generating bonds. Thus, by these means, storytelling tells a life story connected with ordinary people (after all, who has never seen a

Kombi?) – real people – by means of several methods. The video is complemented by several resources and actions in other media, according to the characteristics of each method.

The lacunar report structures the audio-visual composition, since all the stories narrated in fragments must be completed by the recipient's imagination in a process that includes memory, personal involvement, and emotion.

Through the lacunar report proposed in the video *Os Últimos Desejos da Kombi*, the campaign manages to align with the VW brand and its values. The Kombi in the video is blue as the clear sky, free of pollutants; that visual choice is aligned with the VW proposal entitled “Think Blue,”² whose target is sustainability and designs with a focus on education, social development, and ecological solutions.

3 Final considerations

The collection of stories from fans from all over the world was part of the Kombi “de-launching” proposal. In following that strategy, more than four hundred stories from all parts of the planet were received. This engages with and appeals to consumers' feelings; they see here a chance to talk about their lives, showing a story worth being shared and known by all.

Therefore, it is emotion that, from the beginning, sets the tone of the video *Os Últimos Desejos da Kombi*, which imagines death, the end, the departure, the end of a motor vehicle's life personified by a voice. The images enable a journey through time across almost seventy years of the Kombi. The audio-visual narrative construction elevates the vehicle to a symbolic level, presenting it as an icon at several moments in history at times when paradigms were breaking: the Cold War years, or in Woodstock with the hippie movement, or even when it carries people from all over the world, from the most diverse cultures, societies, and religions.

Its multifunctionality allowed this vehicle model to win fans and followers, since its facilities and capacity to adapt allowed it to meet numerous requirements for different audiences in many situations: work, transportation, tourism, recreation, and even homes.

The attempt to identify with the public and thematic universality are recurring elements, and the farewell was the way found by the creative advertising team to communicate with emotion to consumers the end of the manufacture

² Available <https://www.brandchannel.com/2011/05/23/vw-brings-eco-forward-think-blue-campaign-to-the-us/> (9 December 2015).

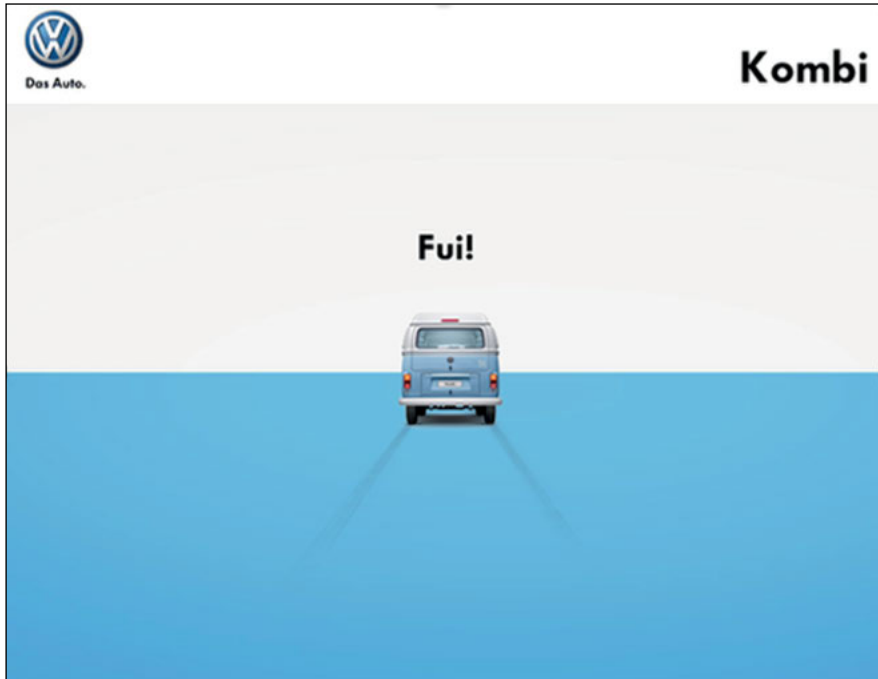


Fig. 2: “Kombi. Gone!” From Volkswagen’s official Kombi website (<http://kombi.vw.com.br/pt/> [9 December 2015]). Promotional Image.

of a product that had existed for more than seventy years – one that had had only two models since its creation, and only a few versions of them, but that had always been highly sought-after by consumers as a versatile utility vehicle with an attractive price.

The game of suspense presented in the script, added to curiosity and emotional stamina, constitutes this lacunar narrative, which makes possible the exploration of other stories inserted in several media in a transmedia intertextuality. Beginning at the end, the narrative demystifies and, at the same time, humanizes the vehicle-people relationship, rendering a tribute to the Kombi “de-launching” as perceived by the creators of the campaign.

Os Últimos Desejos da Kombi gained due recognition among consumers, who acquired, in one week, all 1,200 units produced in the Kombi Last Edition numbered series, and also acknowledgement as an advertising campaign. It won seven awards at the 2014 Cannes Film Festival, including two Golden Lions in the Branded Content & Entertainment category (focused on the creation and integration of original content and a brand) and Five Bronze Lions in the Direct (com-

munication designed to generate specific answers or actions), Public Relations, Film, and Cyber categories. It is worth considering that all this was achieved not to launch a product or service, but to “de-launch” it, making the public aware of the end of the production of a product that spanned generations: the Kombi, due to its design and structure, could not accommodate new technologies and safety requirements, such as mandatory ABS brakes and airbags in all cars, which distanced it from contemporary expectations for vans and utility vehicles.

Today, when accessing Volkswagen’s official website on the Kombi, we find the following image, which ends the campaign:

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Professor Sandra Trabucco Valenzuela, PhD, has a postdoctoral degree in Comparative Literature from the University of São Paulo (USP) and a doctorate and a master’s degree in Spanish-American Literature from USP, is an expert in art history, and has a bachelor’s degree and a degree in Literature (USP). Since 1998, she has been a lecturer at the School of Communication at Anhembi Morumbi University in São Paulo. She is an author of books and scholarly articles and also a broadcasting producer at Radio Mega Brasil Online.

Luciane Ferreira Bonaldo is a doctoral candidate in Information Management at the NOVA Information Management School, New University of Lisbon in collaboration with the University of São Paulo (USP), and has a master's degree in Communication Sciences from USP and a bachelor's degree in Social Communication from Anhembi Morumbi University. She has been a lecturer and coordinator of Advertising Studies at Anhembi Morumbi University (Vila Olímpia campus) since 2003.

